

# Rooms for the Memory

## The 30-year iconic legacy of *Dogs in Space*

David Nichols

Senior Lecturer Urban Planning, University of Melbourne  
[nicholsd@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:nicholsd@unimelb.edu.au)

Sophie Perillo

University of Melbourne

2016 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Richard Lowenstein's acclaimed *Dogs in Space*, a fictionalized cinematic memoir of nominal bohemians in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond. Set 6-8 years before the film's release, Lowenstein utilised genuine participants in the events/milieu depicted, as well as key locations, notably the house central to the film's story.

Icons abound in this film and its subsequent career: an 'icon' of Australian music and culture in Michael Hutchence; the 'Dogs in Space house' (in Berry Street, Richmond) has become a shrine for fans of the film; and the film itself features numerous 'icons' of inner-city Melbourne's built environment, including the Pelaco factory and venues such as St Kilda's Seaview Ballroom.

Questions raised in examination of this important film relate to its legacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – including creative men and women whose profiles were both enhanced and distorted by their involvement in its production – and the way in which it is both remembered and understood in the present day. What does *Dogs in Space* tell us about Melbourne forty years ago (when it is set), thirty years ago (when it was released) and now? How do impressions of the film tally or conflict between those who 'lived it' and those who were either born later, or are not Melbournites, and subsequently come to see it? Using original interview and fieldwork material, this paper reflects on a remarkable document of both the 1970s and the 1980s, seen through a 2016 lens.

**Keywords:**

### Introduction

'As we were living through it it was film worthy material. An exciting period in music, fashion and the arts' – Richard Lowenstein, 1986

In 1977 a teenager from Mt Waverley, Sam Sejavka, quit St Kevins College half way through his final year and moved into a flat in St Kilda. Sejavka was determined to be a writer, or an actor, or a performer, and his subsequent relocations between various share houses and apartments around Melbourne (and a brief period in Sydney) were part of a long period of diffident restlessness. In 1979, he began to write songs for, and sing in, the band which through various permutations became the Ears. The Ears made two singles for the Missing Link label in 1980 and '81. At the time of the release of the first of these singles, 'Leap for Lunch', Sejavka was living in a large share house in Berry Street, Richmond with a number of diverse young men including a film student, Richard Lowenstein, who made a video for the single in the house. The following year – the last year of The Ears' existence in its original iteration – Sejavka's girlfriend, Christine Harding, died of a heroin overdose. The group later reconstituted themselves as Beargarden and signed to a major label, but – career highlights such as the supporting Culture Club on tour aside – were never able to ascend to commercial success. Sejavka became a playwright and actor; Lowenstein became a film director. Less than five years after the demise of the Ears, Lowenstein began work on a film to star the ascendant pop star Michael Hutchence in the role of 'Sam' in a production loosely based on Lowenstein's experiences observing the Melbourne punk/new wave music scene of the late 1970s and early 80s.

The film, *Dogs in Space*, caused controversy when it opened in 1986 and has never sat comfortably in any genre either within Australian films of that era or since, or globally: it holds an 'ambiguous place' (Speed, 2009, 161). It is ostensibly a 'music film' (though never, of course, a musical), arguably a film dealing with 'youth' subjects, most particularly drugs; a piece of historical filmmaking exploring and even in certain respects exposing a subculture (but in no real sense a documentary – indeed, director Richard Lowenstein made a documentary, *We're Living on Dog Food*, in 2006 which explains how much of *Dogs in Space* is/was fiction); and in some respects a comedy, the film adheres to none of the above.

Certainly, it satisfied few at the time of its release, and Lowenstein was blamed as much as praised in the mid-1980s for basing a film so concertedly on his friends' lives from less than a decade before, and yet distorting their personal narratives for the sake of a story. This was perhaps particularly galling for some of those involved considering that the film was commonly supposed to have no, or little, story altogether.

This paper discusses the film's scope and value, as well as the particular way it recast or reshaped an era. Herein we also hope to show the various ways the film has been understood and represented, often in ways which do not do it justice as a multilayered text. Ultimately, we strive to assess the value and 'use' of the film in 2016, when it has achieved a cult status to disparate groups in both Australia and elsewhere. The film is both an icon itself (Facebook groups dedicated to both the film and its 'star', Michael Hutchence, demonstrate the importance it has held for many since its release) and concerns itself with a place and time which has also become iconic – that is, more than merely the subject of sentimentality). Through these means, the house in which the film was made has become an icon – as well as, for many, a place of pilgrimage.

### The house

## Victorian Heritage Database place details - 16/1/2016 RESIDENCE

---



**Location:**  
18 BERRY STREET RICHMOND, Yarra City

Fig 1: 18 Berry Street, Heritage Victoria report, 2015

In October 2015, Heritage Victoria declared that a residence at 18 Berry Street, Richmond was ‘of historical significance to the state of Victoria’ (Fig. 1). This was, in part, for its structural uniqueness: it is one of the few extant timber terraces from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was also marked out by its association with its commissioning ‘builder’, Henry Frencham, a goldfields pioneer born in Ireland and arriving in the tiny hamlet of Melbourne at the age of 24 in 1840. Frencham claimed to have discovered the Bendigo gold field in an attempt to prevent an exodus from Melbourne to the NSW gold rush (Death, 1897). He died in the house – itself known as Berry during his lifetime – in 1897, at the age of 82.

Additionally:

The Residence at 18 Berry Street Richmond is of social significance as the primary location for the filming of the Australian film *Dogs in Space*. *Dogs in Space* portrayed the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll subculture of the late 1970s, one of the first Australian films to do so with a degree of mainstream success. It starred, among others, singer Michael Hutchence, and was an important cultural reference point for young people in the 1980s. The house is still readily recognised by many who have seen the film.

At least one other newsworthy death took place at 18 Berry Street: on 13 January 1911 a 29-year-old unemployed rubber worker with a history of mental illness, Edward John McIntosh, hanged himself from a beam in an upstairs room of the house, a loaded pistol in his pocket (Young Man’s Suicide).

Yet for many the house is associated with the death of a fictional character, based on a death that did not really happen there: that of Anna, the character played by Saskia Post in *Dogs in Space*. Of course, the death itself was fiction. But on one of the soundtrack commentaries to the film's 2006 reissue, director Lowenstein explains that 'No-one died at that house'; Christine Harding, the woman Anna's character was based on, died in St Kilda (on 20 March, 1981 – a date worth noting as it was some years after the period in which *Dogs in Space* is ostensibly set) (<http://sailsofoblivion.blogspot.com.au>).

The Berry Street house, as will be discussed below, is notoriously the 'same place' at which the events depicted in the film took place. In fact, it was only one of many. The reason that so much care was taken to use the Berry Street house in the film was surely its cinematic qualities; Lowenstein was keen to find a 'double storey house at head of a T-junction'; his location scouts found three appropriate houses in Melbourne but none at which a street faced directly into the house. The importance of this is underpinned in the shot which opens the film.

Tim McLaughlan, who has a minor role in the film and who lived in the 'real' household (the character of 'Tim' is played by Nique Needles) remarks of the house that:

It was one of those classic two story late Victorian jobs where you had a corridor on the ground floor going straight through the centre and you had bedroom, bedroom, lounge room, kitchen, bathroom and then upstairs you had two beautifully big bedrooms overlooking a balcony. Then you had a little small pokey bedroom, which was originally mine, and then you had another large bedroom which was Richard's, in those days. There were lots of bedrooms and lots of flexibility in the bedrooms and there was lots of flexibility in the beds.

One is reminded of classic architectural layouts in classic films – Hulot's house in *Mon Oncle*, for instance (and his sister's), or the garden view in *Rear Window*. This is particularly so in scenes in which the entire layout or set is shown in intricate detail. The Berry Street house clearly lent itself to such an approach. Lowenstein himself said at the time of filming that:

I think the area's quite important to the feel of the film and definitely the house ... the script was written for that house so if we hadn't have had the house it would've been a fairly major rewrite for a lot of the scenes ... All the choreography in the script was designed for that house. All the ways you can go through the house because the rooms are largely interconnecting.

### **The house in film language and *Dogs'* status as a documentary**

There are at least two aspects in which *Dogs in Space* avoids conventional film language, and through which some central elements of it have been (perhaps deliberately for Lowenstein as director) misunderstood. The first relates to 18 Berry Street, and the lack of conventional 'establishing' shots so that, for instance a scene in which the unnamed girl (played by Deanna Bond) who often serves as the film's audience's proxy, has her hair dyed by Anna and her friends, is actually in another house – indeed, there is a clarification made on the commentary tracks of the DVD that in the 'real' scenario of the film there was a 'boy's house' (Berry Street) and a 'girl's house'.

The first of the two featured extended party scenes is in yet another house (the second *is* in Berry Street). That is, there are at least three houses depicted in the film, but even the most observant viewer could be forgiven for believing that all the action takes place at 18 Berry Street. This perception is underscored, not diminished, by the fact that the house itself is large and its interior varied: as Charles Meo and Tim McLaughlin observe in their commentary, 'There was a bit of social stratification... the upstairs rooms were much nicer than the downstairs ones.' This difference is made clear in an impressive tracking shot introducing Chris Heyward's unnamed character during which he ascends the house's central stairwell and addresses the occupants of one room on the first floor. Ollie Olsen, the music director of *Dogs in Space* who performs in one scene, recalls on the film's second commentary track that his band Whirlywird and another featured prominently, the Primitive Calculators 'were actually living next door to each other we had these two shopfronts in north Fitzroy so we had this kind of constant interaction between the two households' (Olsen, 2008).

The second (deliberate?) deviation from conventional cinema tropes – perhaps less important – is the time frame covered by the film. There is one subscript at the beginning of the action explaining that we are in Melbourne, 1978. How time plays out thereafter is unclear; as mentioned above, the real events on which the film is based extend at least to 1981. Once again, the viewer may understand the action to take place over two years or two weeks; there are very few signposts and even 'Luchio', who occupies one of the front bedrooms in the house and appears to be constantly studying for exams, may be doing so over a period of weeks or years. This is important largely because so many of the film's elements are so temporal: the 'little bands', for instance, were intended to play two or three shows, and the punk scene itself was open to question and continual renewal and re-creation almost as soon as it began.

There is another, related issue which matters more in regards to *Dogs in Space's* status as, if not a documentary, then as a social document. Producer Glenys Rowe proclaims, in a piece of contemporary footage included in the *We're Living on Dog Food* film, that when she read Lowenstein's original script she 'felt like I was reading a documentary' because it was 'extraordinarily true to life.' Similarly Mick Lewis, guitarist for the Ears, suggests in *The Making of Dogs in Space* that 'I thought it was a documentary'. Yet these are, of course, not mutually inclusive.

There is a distinct possibility that the anarchy of the late 1970s at 18 Berry St was revived for many during filming in 1985. Lowenstein certainly encouraged the idea of barely controlled productivity in *The Making of*, claiming:

we don't tend to work in a general conventional manner, where the director tells everyone what to do, we tend to work more with a pool of ideas. Everyone is able to suggest shots or directions. I do like to keep a flow of ideas and a lot of things we've done in this film and the other films have come from ideas that come out of a communal feeling of everyone pooling their ideas on set.

In this regard there may well be a second, more subtle reiteration of the original events in the film, via a particular rejection of the auteur theory on Lowenstein's part. Additionally mention must be made of spontaneity and the absurdity and inspirational capacity for reactions and interactions between cast members comprised of people who were 'there' the first time around – and people playing the people who were 'there'. Perhaps it is not so much activity in front of the camera that

Rowe is talking about when she explains in *The Making of...* that the film was 'out of control and I was meant to keep it under control'.

It is not, perhaps, wise to embark on comparisons between the events on which a film is based and the way they are portrayed on screen: these are two very different things and the strong similarities between place and character in *Dogs in Space* fudge the distinction, as does the time between reality and film version – between five to eight years. In Charles Meo and Tim McLaughlin's commentary track to *Dogs in Space*, it is declared that 'Berry Street is actually a compression of several different places but it's the coolest one of the lot.' There were, in fact, at least three *Dogs in Space* houses – that is, places where Sam Sejavka and his bandmates in the Ears lived during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Sejavka claims, in his contribution to *We're Living on Dog Food* that 'We were living in a house in Wattletree Road [85 Wattletree Road, Armadale] and we wrote "dogs in space" on every piece of furniture'. Sejavka's diary, which he published online in 2009, includes a long list of houses and flats he lived in between his late teens and early 20s, largely in Armadale or Richmond (three each) but also in St Kilda and Milton St, Elwood. The woman depicted in the film as 'Anna', Christine, was unknown to Sejavka at the time he lived at Berry Street.

### **The music, the music industry and the community**

Perhaps part of the reason *Dogs in Space* resonates for a new generation of fans is the temporal transportability of the many scenes of decadence and mayhem. As Tony Moore's *Dancing with Empty Pockets* demonstrates, there are commonalities in decade after decade of Australian bohemianism – and bohemianism around the world (Moore 2012).

In a mid-1980s interview included in *We're Living on Dog Food*, Richard Lowenstein says:

The late 70s in Australia and all around the world [was] similar to the 60s and the hippies and the beat era and it was a time of quite remarkable fashion music and art changes in the music and art field and it seemed to come with it a period of excitement and vitality.

To be a punk (or a fellow traveller) in Australia in the second half of the 1970s was to be a member of a club with rare interests and values, and even gaining access to the music was difficult. *We're Living on Dog Food* begins with various interviewees listing records and bands they knew and loved from mid-late 70s; the Primitive Calculators declare the music 'formless and undirectional' and Philip Brophy states that 'nothing was validated' and imagery was more important than music; Rowland S Howard suggests of the music one loved that 'it was like hidden treasure.' Clinton Walker, for his part, declares the punks of the time 'snivelling simpering dillittantes'.

These are perceptions, and all have their validity. However, the truth is less dramatic. 'Rock music wasn't crap before punk,' writes Mark Perry, of the band Alternative TV and editor/publisher of the British fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*:

but I'd always had this feeling that there was a gap between us, the fans, and them, the bands, that you couldn't cross. It was like a special club that had the Beatles and the Stones as founders and the only way to become a member was to sit for years alone in your bedroom learning how to play guitar (Perry 2000, 11).

One of the remarkable things about punk rock was the way in which it refracted aspirations of musicians young and old. For James Freud, fresh from the eastern Melbourne suburb of Laburnum, it was a way for his band Teenage Radio Stars to get noticed and find a way into the industry – although ironically the ‘Teenage Radio Stars’ which did achieve hit single status was an almost entirely different band, with Freud the only constant. To use and abandon a ‘punk’ image was itself ‘punk’ behavior. For others the stage and the scene were merely a moment for a theatrical art project, such as the Little Bands movement designed entirely to perform a limited number of songs for a limited number of performances.

The grim humour of Lowenstein’s *Dogs in Space* punks is, firstly, that while there is no overt discussion of ambition, Lowenstein clearly intends us to understand that the band at the heart of the film has no grand ideals or desire for social change, but that at least some of them hope to materially gain from music. This is referenced superficially in the household’s obsession with the pop show *Countdown* (although, as Peter Wilmoth’s book *Glad All Over* demonstrates, this was not unique or unusual) but more directly in the film’s final scene, in which it is made plain that the group’s otherwise unfocused, cowardly and selfish singer Sam has built a successful career from his ostensibly humble beginnings – and the tragedy of the death of his girlfriend Anna.

Similarly, the film explores (covertly: there are no ‘dole cheque’ discussions) what Stuart Grant describes in *We’re Living on Dog Food* as the financial underpinning of the entire society depicted: ‘What made that scene possible was the legacy of the Whitlam government... they made the dole liveable’

### The politics

As mentioned above, political commitment in *Dogs in Space* is a subject either for ridicule or, at the very least, objective observation. There are a range of minor characters – few of them genuinely ‘of’ the core cast – who express (or parrot) the rhetoric of political activism. At the time of filming, Lowenstein claimed that the film was about ‘a group of people in the house and visiting the house – trying to capture all the different subgroups and subcultures that were round in the late like the dying out of the hippie era, the death of student politics, and the growth of the punk era.’

Gary Foley’s minor character Barry is in *Dogs in Space* largely as a humorous figure. Like Chris Heyward, who dominates only one scene, Foley was already a known actor, having taken the ‘the central Aboriginal role’ (Malone, 1987, 73) in *Backroads* and a film which slightly predates *Dogs in Space* but which might be considered its Sydney counterpart, *Going Down*. Peter Malone’s assessment of the film in his *In Black and White in Colour* suggests that the characters in *Dogs in Space* are presented as idealistic yet often merely mouthing slogans for social current issues. They are on the edge of the drug culture. Rock and roll music is important. So are sexual relationships.’ He continues:

One of the issues is land rights for Aborigines. One young man remarks that he had a friend who had an Aboriginal girlfriend. “She was very nice.” We see Gary Foley portray a character who wanders in and out of the house with bottles of alcohol, with girls. We hear him arguing about the status of Aborigines, that women and blacks are both on the

bottom rung. He uses aggressive and blunt language to make his points. The whole film offers a mid-'80s interpretation of 1978 attitudes. (Malone, 1987, 79)

Malone's assessment obfuscates a fine joke in the film, possibly inappropriate at an academic conference, in which Barry at turns joins Erica, an orange jumpsuit-wearing lesbian, in berating an unidentified partygoer on behalf of women's rights and then threatens the same man with a broken bottle in the service of Aboriginal rights. Lowenstein adds, however, in one of the DVD commentary tracks that Barry had a larger presence in the original film; there was a deleted scene in which he 'chases his girlfriend through the lounge room with a knife and she huddles under the kitchen table with blood on her... they did have their own storyline and it was much more upfront.'

Other references to political activity are clearly played for comedic effect, perhaps best considered in the context of Lowenstein's earlier work: his mother Wendy (1927-2006) was an oral and folk music historian whose activism was reinforced by her practice and his previous films *Evictions* and *Strikebound* were heavily influenced by her approach. In *Dogs in Space* characters mouth default platitudes which, while not incomprehensible to them or others, are hardly evidence of original thought. This is particularly so in the scene that shows the student activist Barbara visit the Berry Street house to ask that the group play a 'Rock Against Unemployment' benefit ('it eats into the living tissue of the working classes like a tumour,' she says). Her stream of rote-learned rhetoric signifies her both as a bore and a shill (this is the sum total of her character, although as an attractive young woman and a keen dope smoker she has been accepted to some degree by the household as she later appears in a party scene) but most important, as a figure of fun. Lowenstein claims, in the first of the three commentaries to *Dogs in Space*, that 'The young socialist league tried to get the Ears to play a benefit they couldn't understand that a benefit meant they wouldn't get paid.' Other individuals – chiefly, the 'hippies' – are similarly shallow in their self-characterisation. However, as is ultimately made plain, the anti-social and/or 'social drop-out' attitudes of the majority of the household is in essence a chimera to mask hedonism, laziness or a generally supine attitude.

While *Dogs in Space* is a very different take on history (per se) to Wendy Lowenstein's (which, while not po-faced, was partisan) with a much lighter approach to political struggle, notably one of the pub scenes in *Dogs in Space* features, Lowenstein later said, 'an actor playing an oral historian... there was a guy who used to record the bands for posterity... for the future. Because we knew these bands weren't going to be round for very long.'

### **Icons memorialized: *Dogs in Space* as a Michael Hutchence 'vehicle'**

Although this paper has, in many ways, problematized *Dogs in Space* as a document of a time and place, its reputation as a vehicle for the pop star Michael Hutchence (1960-1997) has been more damaging to its perceived value than any other feature. Hutchence's role in the film, it seems, satisfies neither his fans nor his detractors; many denigrate his performance, yet those who consider him to be the film's star can hardly be pleased with his limited screen presence; he is really only one of a large ensemble. As Lowenstein has often made clear, however, it is only Hutchence's spontaneous agreement to star in the film which made its production possible (and indeed its initial premise was extemporized in the course of a pitching meeting to a prospective producer at which Hutchence happened to be present). Hutchence himself declared the film 'a work of love' (1986).

'Michael was a better Sam than Sam was', McLaughlin and Meo agree in their commentary, adding that 'Sam was never a very good Sam.' Sejavka, essentially, agrees: 'I think he did a fantastic job of playing me'. Hutchence had one more acting role after this one, but concentrated primarily on music in the final decade of his life. One prominent product of the *Dogs in Space* era was the studio band Max Q, which featured Hutchence and Olsen as well as a number of other Melbourne underground music luminaries, temporarily given mainstream prominence for the duration of the album's promotion. Max Q and the *Dogs in Space* soundtrack share a similar role in bringing a certain ethos to prominence in the mid-to-late 1980s at a time when there was little interest in non-commercial music or (to use an easy shorthand) 'bohemia'.

## Conclusion

Lowenstein says in *The Making Of...* that he believed 18 Berry St was 'quite a good model for a microcosm for all the different groups that were around in that era.' In the making of the film, he has captured a potent and creative time; its current cultural relevance is testament to the universality of the story. A larger part of this lies also in the diversity of the household and the cohorts it embraces. In this regard, it is a cultural microcosm but also perhaps a microcosm of the 'bohemian' inner city prior to gentrification on the large scale seen some decades later (and already creeping into Melbourne's inner city, though more commonly in the mid-1980s in the inner north rather than the inner east).

*Dogs in Space* will undoubtedly continue to gain followers over time, as a rich and multifaceted text. At the heart of *Dogs in Space* is the house: in certain regards, another character or at very least a facilitator of action and interaction throughout the film. 18 Berry Street was, in the late 1970s/early 1980s a house 'down on its luck', a once luxurious structure that only had market value at this time as a overpopulated student 'dive'; within five years it had been completely renovated and remade, to the degree that the film's producers were compelled to 'de-gentrify' it, temporarily restoring its former shambolic nature, for the sake of the film. That the events depicted in the film itself gild the house's heritage value is an intriguing extra element; that the role of the house as a central element of the film was amplified for its spatial placement and its physical appearance and malleability as a 'set' make it all the more remarkable. The degree to which it can be regarded as a document, or even a 'true' account, is open to continued debate, but nonetheless it remains an extraordinary text and a remarkable experience and critique.

## References

### Journal article:

Speed, L. 2009. Win and Lose: Subculture and social difference in *Dogs in Space*. *Metro* 162, 161-165.

### Book

Malone, P. 1987 *In Black and White and Colour: A Survey of Aborigines in Australian Feature Films* Nellen Yubu Missiological Series Leura

Moore, T. 2012. *Dancing with Empty Pockets: Australia's Bohemians since 1860*. Millers Point: Pier 9.

Perry, M. 2000. 'Mark P's Blurb' in Terry Rawlings (ed) *Sniffin' Glue* Sanctuary, London

Wilmott, P. 1983. *Glad All Over: the Countdown Years 1974-1987*. Ringwood: McPhee-Gribble.

#### Web

Sejavka, S. 2008. 28 March 1981 thurs 2:30 pm [online] Available from: <http://sailsofoblivion.blogspot.com.au> [Accessed 29 October 2015].

#### Newspaper article

Anon, 1897. 'Death of Mr. H. Frencham' *Bendigo Advertiser* Tuesday 6 July p. 3.

Anon, 1911 'Young Man's Suicide' *Melbourne Argus* 14 January p. 21

#### Films

Going Down

Dogs in Space

We're Living on Dog Food

Evictions

Strikebound

Rear Window

M. Hulot's Holiday